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Title

Teaching interculturality ‘beyond’ culture: challenges and future possibilities

This chapter presents the reader with a question: is it possible to teach interculturality ‘beyond’ culture? I begin with the assumption that interculturality is not a neutral term and that it is always ideological and political. I refer in particular to the dominance of Western centric constructs of cultural competence, cultural awareness and cultural adaptation and I contextualise interculturality within current movements to decolonise knowledge. Taking the example of teacher education in England, the chapter suggests possible approaches to teach interculturality beyond culture, presenting some of the challenges that emerge when leaving the comfort zone of cultural difference and intercultural competence. The chapter aims to highlight the need to introduce decolonial and critical approaches to interculturality, equipping student teachers to become agents of change in promoting social justice in the classroom.

Interculturality ‘beyond’ culture

This chapter presents the reader with a question: is it possible to teach interculturality ‘beyond’ culture? I use the phrase ‘beyond’ culture to take distance from essentialist and Western centric notions of culture seen as static entities employed to assign fixed sets of traits to characterise people, and in particular those who we see as ‘other’ from us. To this end, I begin this chapter with the clarification that interculturality is not a neutral term and that it is always ideological and political (Dervin, Simpson, 2021). In particular, referring to Dervin and Simpson’s argument I highlight here the need to make clear my own stance, including the context in which I operate, in order to illustrate how writing about interculturality is always embedded in wider political influences as well as in the personal reflexivity of the author.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the ideological assumptions that underpin the dominance of Western centric constructs of cultural competence in the field of interculturality, including (inter)cultural awareness and (inter)cultural adaptation. I then contextualise interculturality within current movements to decolonise knowledge. However, I

am aware of the dangers implicit in ‘false generosity’ towards peripheral voices (Dervin, Simpson, 2021), of the double bind (Spivak, 1988) implicit in critiquing a field from the inside, and of the need to exercise critical vigilance when talking about interculturality from a critical perspective (Ferri, 2018). Thus, I do not intend to suggest a linear and unproblematic narrative of emancipation from Western-centric constructs to an opening towards ‘global’ perspectives. As I have argued at length elsewhere (Ferri, 2020, 2022), individual intercultural becomings are entangled in narratives of power, displacement, misunderstandings, resistance, translations, negotiation, and emotional work. This personal, autobiographical dimension of interculturality made of everyday interactions in the context of small cultures (Holliday, 2016) that create hybridity, third spaces (Bhabha, 1994), and unique intercultural translations (Ferri, 2022), interacts with the grand narratives of national culture and essentialist ‘us-them’ narratives (Amadasi, Holliday, 2018). Therefore, my main aim in this chapter is to highlight complexity and the ideological struggles over conflicting definitions of culture, in particular the ways in which this complexity is applied to education with reference to my own context of teacher education in England.

Starting from my context in England and London more specifically, the chapter will outline the educational philosophy that underpins the introduction of intersectional and intercultural approaches to the curriculum in a teacher education course and how this project sits in direct confrontation with current ideological debates around culture wars and an anti-immigrant, nationalistic agenda in Brexit Britain. I will suggest possible approaches to teach interculturality ‘beyond’ culture, presenting some of the challenges that emerge when leaving the comfort zone of cultural difference and intercultural competence. The chapter aims to highlight the need to introduce critical, decolonial, intersectional and reflexive practices that equip student teachers to become agents of change in their own contexts. My argument is that

ultimately every critical pedagogical project needs to take into account the wider political and ideological forces that are brought to bear in the micro context of the classroom.

Intercultural competence

An important constant presence in intercultural communication and other subfields of knowledge is the notion of competence. Applied to disparate fields such as diplomatic relations, business, education including language education, multicultural workplaces, health settings, the idea of intercultural competence is underpinned by the need to bridge cultural differences through knowledge of the other and the understanding of different communicative styles and behaviours in the context of differing cultural expectations and values. The notion of competence has shifted from the essentialist categorisation of cultural traits along national lines and East-West, North-South dichotomies in earlier versions of intercultural communication (Hall, 1976) to current frameworks that foreground democracy and dialogue in diverse societies, as for example the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (2018), The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2020), or the UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education (2006). As I have argued extensively elsewhere (Ferri, 2014, 2018, see also Sercu, 2010), the notion of competence is problematic on a number of levels, which I summarise according to two main themes. First, the claim that the acquisition of specific skills, knowledge and competencies can assist in achieving transparency in communication originates from a reductionistic understanding of culture as a set of fixed traits that can be used to categorise groups of people, and as a result the processual, tentative, and at times conflictual dynamic of interaction is under theorised in these frameworks. Second, the notion of competence presumes a higher position of a universalised self, leading to the othering of the cultural ‘other’, who is seen as the essentialised bearer of cultural traits. In other words, the universalistic discourse underpinning these frameworks glosses over the social interrelationships between speakers

(Simpson and Dervin, 2019) and culture as ‘*a site of discursive struggle between competing groups*’ (Dasli, 2019, p.227). This brief overview of the notion of competence brings to the fore the complex semantic web of the word culture and the issue of determinism.

Culture, determinism and agency

The word culture is one of the most complex words in the English language (Eagleton, 2000), denoting a concept that derives etymologically from the Latin *colere*, meaning to tend, to cultivate the land. In this sense as Eagleton (2000, p.3) writes, ‘*nature produces culture which changes nature*’, meaning that there is a dialectical aspect in this relationship between nature and culture and that we are not only the product of nature but that we also refashion nature through human activity. This dialectic raises the issue of agency, or of freedom and determinism, in understanding ourselves as self-reflexive beings who claim a place in a world in which nature is fashioned by human activity but within the limits set by nature itself.

Another related meaning of culture is attached to the notion of civilisation, of particular importance in this context is the nineteenth century movement of European Romantic nationalism, and the idea of culture as expression of the unique identity of a group of people connected by the same language, customs and tradition (Müller-Funk, 2012). Referring to the birth of European national identities, Anderson (1983), described nations as imagined communities because they are imagined by people who perceive themselves as part of a distinct group. This dynamic can be observed in the methodological nationalism (Willem, Schiller, 2002) adopted in the social sciences that assumes culture as bounded by the limits of the nation state.

From a different perspective, the critical cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2018) relates the word culture to hegemony and the distinction between popular and elite culture, highlighting how cultural relations are embedded in structures of dominance, conflict and struggle. In this sense, culture represents a conflicting terrain in which ideological struggles are played out

between differing groups with the top down imposition of dominant discourses interacting with the dynamic complex of forces that reproduce and transform them. On a similar note, Street (1993) presents culture as a verb, denoting culture as a discursive construction built in interaction. This indeterminacy of cultural meanings is also visible in written texts, not only in verbal interactions (Kramsch, 1998), and the role of our social identities is crucial in this meaning making activity. To summarise, the two main issues that arise when we look at culture from the perspective of hegemony are the agency of individuals in fashioning their own meanings and the contested narratives of competing groups and their right to claim a separate identity.

Although the field of intercultural communication has traditionally oversimplified the notion of culture according to the parameters set by romantic nationalism, or imagined communities, many have engaged with the polysemic nature of the word and presented a view of culture as dynamic, processual and fluid (see for example the notion of liquid culture in Dervin, 2011; small culture in Holliday, 2011, 2013; the transculturing self in Monceri, 2003, 2009; the double swing model in Yoshikawa, 1987). Piller (2011) emphasises the sociolinguistic dimension of interculturality, arguing that the role of culture in misunderstanding and conflict in intercultural interaction is inflated. Furthermore, Piller describes how intercultural communication is marketized in the globalised circulation of cultural symbols and languages, for example with the use of ethno-cultural stereotypes in advertising. Despite these critical interventions, it can be argued that intercultural communication scholarship is still dominated by Western centric approaches and the notion of culture in particular reflects this limited worldview. In attempting to establish a counter-narrative to this dominance, Miike (2007) and Asante (2013) use Asiancentricity and Afrocentricity to reclaim agency and to recentre the cultural narratives that have been displaced by centuries of European colonial domination.

In my vision of interculturality, the recognition of this macro historical context determined by colonialism is crucial in order to contextualise interpersonal and intercultural relations within a wider perspective that accounts for power and epistemic inequality. In her book *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak (1988) describes epistemic violence in a colonial context, to argue that the coloniser erases other types of knowledge outside the dominant group and this means that other types of knowing become invisible, they are erased, silenced. This epistemic silencing represents one of the main problems in interculturality and one that is increasingly coming to the fore in critical readings of the field (see Phipps, 2014; Phipps, Sitholé, 2020; Aman, 2014; Ferri, 2022).

Nelson's ship in a bottle

The contested nature of the word culture and its connections with hegemony and epistemic silencing is visible in the artwork of British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare. In his *Nelson's ship in a bottle*, Shonibare creates a visual representation of the legacy of colonialism and of its ramifications in contemporary formulations of cultural identity and belonging [insert image here]. This replica of the HMS Victory, the British Royal Navy flagship captained by Lord Nelson in 1805 during the Battle of Trafalgar, deviates from the original model with the addition of thirty-seven sails that are printed with patterns that are normally associated with West African identity (Shirey, 2019). The artwork is on permanent display at Greenwich Park in London, after being installed as a temporary fourth plinth between 2010 and 2012 in Trafalgar Square where Lord Nelson's statue is displayed to commemorate this significant victory that symbolises British naval supremacy. Shonibare's replica represents a powerful metaphor of the complex global web of influences and hegemonic relations that characterise the process of cultural identification in post-colonial contexts. The choice of Dutch textiles of Indonesian origin, now associated with West Africa through trade and colonial relations, challenges the national narrative of British colonial power and naval dominance focusing on

the multiplicity of possible identifications that result from living in a post-colonial global metropolis such as London. One important intercultural lesson that we can learn from analysing this artwork is that the process of questioning a familiar cultural symbol such as the HMS Victory and observing it from a different perspective adds a number of interpretative layers to accepted understandings of national identity and cultural belonging. Lau (2019, p.130) describes this process as a *come-and-go* dynamic ‘*between moments of familiarity and strangeness, of identification and differentiation, of recognition and distancing, of affirmation and negation.*’ In other words, the process of interrogation of familiar cultural symbols attests to the dynamic and reciprocal relation between individuals and their cultural environments. This is described by Lau as acquiring a *cultural flesh* understood as a lived, embodied experience of interculturality. However, this relation is never devoid of power in particular through the silencing of ‘other’ voices (Spivak, 1988) that are excluded from group narratives of belonging and cultural identification. This issue becomes salient in the context of the curriculum wars currently taking place in my context in England, which I will describe in more detail in the following section.

Teacher education in England

The project of educational restoration towards a regressive traditionalism (Ball, 1993) across the English-speaking world started in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and USA respectively. This alignment between a regressive political agenda and schools as sites of reproduction of dominant ideology (Apple, 2000; Bourdieu, Passeron, 1970) is visible in current ‘culture wars’ over the curriculum in conservative, nationalistic Brexit Britain. Following the Black Lives Matter movement and the Windrush scandal¹, there is a growing debate in the UK around the legacy of colonialism

¹ The ‘Windrush’ generation are those who arrived in the UK from Caribbean countries between 1948 and 1973. Many took up jobs in the nascent National Health Service and other sectors affected by Britain’s post-war labour shortage. The name ‘Windrush’ derives from the ‘HMT Empire Windrush’ ship which brought one of the first large groups of Caribbean people to the UK in 1948. As the Caribbean was, at the time, a part of the British commonwealth, those who arrived were automatically

and even more specifically what is an ‘English’ identity. This is exacerbated by the decision to leave the European Union in the pursuit of a nostalgic idea of the long-lost era of British influence on the world stage. Post-2010 Conservative reforms in the English education system focus on discipline, conservatism, and standards (Cushing, 2021a), as well as advocating a return to rote learning, factual knowledge, basic literacy and numeracy (Brundrett, 2015), with an emphasis on fundamental British values. The fundamental Islamophobic and exclusionary character of the notion of British values (namely: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance) is not the main focus of this chapter (see Richardson, 2015 for a discussion of this policy and the exceptionalism that underpins it), however it signals a strong reactionary response to ideas of hybridity, multiculturalism and diversity in British life. This is compounded by a narrow English-centric curriculum that promotes an outdated image of Britain as a benevolent global force of democracy and progress (Watson, 2020). The push towards a simplified and narrow curriculum based on factual knowledge and a return to a more traditional focus on discipline and behaviour management in the classroom has entailed a reform of teacher education. Since 2011 the government in England has attempted to remove teacher education from universities, promoting school-based training as more effective in preparing teachers for the profession (Mutton, Burn, Menter, 2017). This process culminated with the introduction of the Core Content Framework in 2019 (DfE, 2019) a mandatory narrow curriculum for all teacher training institutions based on cognitive science, with little acknowledgment of the cultural and social factors that influence learning. This turn in education policy towards a regressive and limiting view of the purpose of education and of the role of teachers translates

British subjects and free to permanently live and work in the UK. The Windrush scandal began to surface in 2017 after it emerged that hundreds of Commonwealth citizens, many of whom were from the ‘Windrush’ generation, had been wrongly detained, deported and denied legal rights (The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants).

in a number of dilemmas for both practising teachers, student teachers and teacher educators committed to ideals of interculturality, social justice, diversity and inclusion. However, I argue that this turn also demonstrates the urgency of revising what it means to practice interculturality and what it means to be an interculturalist.

The London context

London is a multicultural city with a population of about 9.0 million people, of which about 37% are immigrants from many parts of the world, and more that 300 languages are spoken in schools (London Datastore). From my vantage point as an educator in the context of a global metropolis like London, I place regressive national policy drivers in contrast with the conviviality (Gilroy, 2004) of lived intercultural reality in a postcolonial city. From this perspective interculturality becomes a *modus operandi*, a practice of teaching interculturality that is embedded in all aspects of classroom life as a form of resistance to dominant narratives of a unified national culture and a uniform standard language. This ethos informs my practice as an intercultural educator working in a diverse, multicultural, multilingual context. I do not subscribe to the idea of competence, and I focus on encouraging student teachers to think critically about culture and how interaction is a complex and dynamic process constituted by many layers including power differentials, the historical heritage of colonial relations, and the many intersecting facets of identity in a postcolonial global space such as a London classroom. Teaching interculturality for me is a critical endeavour that develops along two intersecting axes, one based on a critical understanding of the contested ideology underpinning the National Curriculum in England and the other based on self-reflexivity. The two are brought together through a reflective understanding of the ways in which our own positionalities underpin our practice as educators according to the vision of the critical pedagogy of Freire (1970) and hooks (1940).

Teaching interculturality/Teaching interculturality

An important part of the MA level course I am involved in entails preparing student teachers to teach the Humanities. Reflecting on the contested nature of knowledge and the ways in which its translation in a school curriculum is ideologically inflected (Apple, 2019), student teachers are introduced to the notion of the hidden curriculum and how hegemony works in the transmission of dominant values. In this regard, Apple (2019, p.161) writes that:

Through the definition, incorporation, and selection of what is considered legitimate or 'real' knowledge, through positing a false consensus on what are appropriate facts, skills, hopes, and fears (and the way we all should evaluate them), the economic and cultural apparatus are dialectically linked. Here knowledge is power, but primarily in the hands of those who have it already, who already control cultural capital as well as economic capital.

This hegemonic appropriation and transmission of knowledge through the school curriculum is obvious in the humanities and particularly in the subjects of History and Geography (see Gov.uk for an overview of the English national school curriculum at both primary and secondary levels). Much of recent debates on the curriculum in England revolve on the lack of diversity in the humanities and the promotion of an outdated image of the country that assumes whiteness as its defining characteristic. In this context, Wemyss (2009) uses the image of the Invisible Empire to describe this hegemonic discourse of Britishness, and important initiatives like the Black Curriculum Report (2020) and Runnymede Perspectives (2015) highlight the systematic omission from the national curriculum of the contribution of black and ethnic minority groups in the creation of modern Britain. In order to counteract this hegemonic narrative, student teachers are encouraged to challenge this tacit assumption of whiteness and the official narratives of the civilising mission of Britain as a benign power. We reflect on our own overlapping identities and critically evaluate a number of sources that depict life in multi-ethnic, multilingual, diverse Britain and reflect on how this diversity is often glossed over in everyday life, in the media, in textbooks and in the curriculum. This is an important step in working with student teachers to develop their critical understanding of the ideological discourses that underpin the creation of the school curriculum, in particular

the silences and the invisibilities that are made operational in the mandate to promote British exceptionalism, as exemplified by the compulsory teaching of British values and the policing of language use based on a monolingual ideal of Standard English (Cushing, 2021b). It is significant that in the devolved school systems in the UK the teaching of languages is an undervalued aspect, particularly in England, and despite various government initiatives (see House of Commons Briefing Paper, 2020), there has been very little progress made to improve the provision of language teaching in schools and to promote the values of intercultural dialogue and intercultural understanding through language learning.

The ability to reflect critically on one's own practice with the aim to transform the lives of students is one of the main tenets of critical pedagogy (Door, 2014). Critical pedagogical practice is underpinned by an understanding of the ways in which knowledge is used to consolidate hegemonic narratives (Giroux, 2020) and by reflexivity intended as the process of thought-reflection-action (Holmes, Peña Dix, 2022). One aspect of critical pedagogy that is discussed in the MA course is Freire's (1970) notion of banking education. In Freire's words (1970, p.56), banking education assumes '*a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others: the individual is spectator, not re-creator*'. Students become passive minds who receive '*deposits of reality from the world outside*', and they are thus deprived of agency and of the ability to change the world in which they live. This issue is particularly relevant for student teachers who are entering a profession in which teachers' and students' agency is severely restricted and reflexivity is constrained by multiple competing pressures aimed at raising standards and imparting decontextualized skills to young children and young people. Despite the many restrictions imposed on teacher educators and on student teachers by this culture of performativity, self-reflexivity aligns theory with practice and places transformative action at

the centre of education. hooks (1994, p.44) writes about the importance of recognising that education is never politically neutral, embracing multicultural reality as a source of strength:

Multiculturalism compels educators to recognise the narrow boundaries that have shaped the way knowledge is shared in the classroom. It forces us all to recognise our complicity in accepting and perpetuating biases of any kind.

Practising interculturality in this context means to attune student teachers to the complexity of the multicultural classroom and to appreciate individual differences, cultures, languages and needs. In other words, interculturality is enacted through education by embedding difference as a positive value in everyday practice.

Conclusion. What does it mean to interculturalize interculturality?

To me, to interculturalize interculturality means to assume difference as a starting point for the creation of a more just and equal world through education. Thinking about epistemic violence, one problem that has occupied me is the ways in which we think about the self and the other but in particular how we use our bodies in intercultural communication. A lot of attention is paid to language and interaction through language, and fixing communication through linguistic competence, but the question of the ways in which we behave interculturally with our bodies when we interact is still underexplored. Linked to this issue, I am interested in how some bodies are seen as ‘other’, as different, and how this connects to wider intersectional inequalities. For example, the area of queer intercultural communication (Yep, Lescure, Russo, 2019; Chàvez, 2013) highlights the crucial role of sexuality and gender in the practices of cultural identity opening to non-Western epistemological frameworks (Eguchi, Asante, 2016; Asante, 2018). There is also an emerging field of feminist intercultural communication, looking for example at rape and sexual assault and how this is institutionalized in different cultural contexts (Zenovich, Cooks, 2018) or at the construction and performance of gender from a decolonial perspective (Lengel, Atay, Kluch, 2020). I

believe these interventions bring important new perspectives to interculturality, opening a dialogue with intersectional, queer and feminist studies. In closing, I see interculturality moving forward in regarding culture beyond the methodological nationalism of grand narratives to investigate the dialectic between *small cultures* and *big cultures*, or in other words how culture in interaction is embedded in and influenced by wider geopolitical issues.

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